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# The Poor and Homeless: An Opportunity for Libraries to Serve

Sheila Ayers

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## Introduction

Serving the poor and homeless presents one of the greatest challenges America's public libraries have ever faced. With their numbers increasing every year the poor and homeless need a path out of poverty and help to ease the pain along the way. In 2003 the poverty rate rose to 12.5% in the United States; 35.9 million people were poor in 2003. That is 1.3 million more than were poor in 2002. In 2000 the poverty rate was 11.3% with 31.6 million in poverty. In 2003 the poverty rate for the Northeast was 11.3%, Midwest 10.7%, South 14.1% and West 12.6%. From 2002 to 2003 the poverty rate in the Midwest rose from 6.6 million to 6.9 million. While the number in the South rose from 14.0 million to 14.5 million. (U.S. Bureau of the Census) Out of these numbers rise the nation's homeless.

Public libraries offer new worlds to the poor by providing information in a wide variety of different forms on every subject imaginable. The information is an opportunity which opens the door to other opportunities and can change or save lives. Librarians, as keepers of the keys of knowledge, have an obligation to spread information like a balm over those scarred by poverty. The knowledge contained in public libraries can heal the poor in body, mind, and spirit. The information contained in public libraries can empower and enable the poor to change their lives.

## A History of Homelessness in the United States

During the Colonial period colonists who were not pulling their weight were either put on a boat back to England or sent to other colonies. In the 1980s many cities tried to solve their homeless problem by giving indigents one way bus tickets to other cities. This was called "Greyhound therapy." After the Civil War the number of homeless

males rose due to a lack of job opportunities. The hobo population rose after World War I. Most hobos were young men who traveled the country living the hobo lifestyle. They were seen as misfits in society (Hersberger 1999).

Between 1929 and 1939 during the Great Depression, large numbers of people, families as well as individuals, became homeless. These people became homeless due to a national economic disaster, not because they were dysfunctional individuals. After World War II homelessness was almost a nonexistent condition in America. Cheap sleeping rooms only (SROs) were easy to find in urban areas. This continued until 1980 (Hersberger 1999).

There was a sharp rise in homelessness in the 1980s due to several factors. The Reagan administration's policy on deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and its funding cuts for subsidized housing contributed to the increase in numbers. Another factor was the breakdown of marriages. Many people divorced and that thrust many women and children into poverty. The nation's illegal drug problem also contributed to the rise in homelessness (Hersberger 1999).

In 1999 two national studies, *Homelessness: Programs and People They Serve* and *The Face of Homelessness* provided a profile of the 2 million people who experience homelessness each year:

- 33% of them work.
- 40% are mentally ill (lack of adequate health care and social services push mentally ill out on their own).
- 85% are single; of these: 77% are men, 23% women.
- 41% are white non-Hispanic.
- 40% are black non-Hispanic.

- 10% are Hispanic.
- 8% are native American
- 38% have alcohol-use problems.
- 26% have drug-use problems.
- 39% have mental-health problems.
- 20% eat one meal a day or less.
- 40% went one or more days in the last 30 without anything to eat.

Among homeless families:

- 84% have female heads of household, 16% male.
- 38% are white non-Hispanic.
- 43% are black non-Hispanic.
- 15% are Hispanic.
- 3% are Native American (Grace 2000).

One percent of the population of the United States experiences homelessness each year (Urban Institute 2000). (National Coalition for the Homeless 2002)

## Two Tales of Homeless Men in Libraries

Some homeless people used public libraries before becoming homeless; they naturally gravitate to the libraries when they find themselves on the streets. Other homeless people find libraries for the first time when they become homeless and library may become a shelter for them. However, there is potential for the library to do more than shelter them. The library can become a gateway to a new life if the homeless discover the resources it contains.

In 2004 a homeless man in Huntsville, Alabama used the Madison County Library. At the time he was living under a bridge in a tent provided by the Homeless Coalition and was in walking distance of the library. During an interview with the writer, Tom (not his real name) stated that he went to the library “pretty much every day for four or five hours.” He said he went there to get warm and to stay out of the weather. Sometimes

he slept while he was there.

While he was in the library Tom read newspapers, magazines, and books but did not use the Internet, audiocassettes, or videotapes. He did not use library resources to find a job or to find out about social services. Tom said he did not use the library bathroom to wash either himself or his clothes but that other homeless people who were in the library did use the bathroom to shave, brush their teeth, and change clothes.

Tom told the writer that several homeless people stayed together in areas on both the first and second floor of the library. He said the library employees did not bother him and the regular patrons did not bother him either. Tom felt the library was a safe place and he liked being there. He did recall that some of the homeless people were asked to leave when they were panhandling at the entrance of the library.

Tom was a typical homeless person who was looking for a safe place to spend a few hours. After spending a few months visiting the library on a daily basis, Tom was described by his sister as being very well read and knowledgeable about what was going on in the world.

Richard Kreimer, a homeless man in Morristown, New Jersey during the late 1980s visited the Joint Free Library of Morristown. He “was asked to leave the library because of bodily odors, inappropriate stalking of female patrons, and abusive outbursts” (Silver 1996). Kreimer and the ACLU sued the library stating that Kreimer’s First Amendment rights were compromised. The ACLU contended there was nothing to keep libraries from “using their own prejudices to remove someone they don’t like” (Silver 1996).

Federal Judge H. Lee Saroken ruled that the homeless cannot be barred from public libraries due to “staring or hygiene that annoys or offends other patrons”. (Silver 1996) A Federal Appeals Court overturned the lower court’s ruling. The Federal Appeals Court stated that the “Library is a limited public forum and is obligated only to permit the public to exercise rights that are consistent with the nature of the library”. “The appeals panel stated that the library is not a shelter or a lounge, and that this ruling prohibits one

patron from unreasonably interfering with other patron's use and enjoyment of the library" (Silver 1996).

In response the American Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee drafted a proposal to address offensive patron odor, staring, outbursts, and other inappropriate library behavior. Five hundred librarians rejected this policy as vague. The executive director of the committee noted in regard to offensive odors, "There are some perfumes that absolutely make me nauseous" (Silver 1996).

Concerning homeless patrons E.J. Josey said, "These people are not problem patrons, they are patrons in need of your help, because you are a civilizing agency. The library has the power to help them and as librarians you have the power to help forge coalitions that will serve not only the homeless, but also the best interest of your city and your library" (Venturella 1998). Clearly the two men described in the above stories were in need of help. Tom was able to fit into the library atmosphere and not cause a disruption. His use of the library's books and periodicals was acceptable. However, Tom might have benefited even more from the library if he had learned to use the Internet while he was there. Tom could have also used the library as a resource to find a job. He made acceptable use of the library, but he did not use it to its fullest advantage.

Kreimer seemed as if he may have needed professional help from mental health professionals. His behavior in the library would have been bizarre in any setting. Library staff members need to formulate a policy for dealing with inappropriate behavior. The book *Patron Behavior in Libraries* by Beth McNeil and Denise Johnson offers authoritative solutions to problems such as how to interact with mentally ill patrons, patrons who sleep in the library and the legal implications that may arise after action has been taken.

### **Sub-populations of the Homeless**

The homeless are not a homogeneous group. One study "categorized sub-populations of the homeless as single males, Vietnam veterans (a subgroup of homeless males), homeless single

females (sometimes further categorized, like males into age groups), homeless couples, run-away teenagers, and families" (Hersberger 1999). Further subdivisions can be based on race and ethnicity. Substance abusers or the mentally ill create two more subdivisions. When libraries are considering services to homeless persons the libraries should have "knowledge of local homeless populations and their particular subgroups" (Hersberger 1999).

Another perception is of the deserving and undeserving poor. The deserving poor are seen as being the homeless families, homeless children, and persons working to better their situations. The deserving poor are seen as becoming homeless through no fault of their own. "Those who become homeless due to personal dysfunction or weakness, i.e substance abuse problems with drugs or alcohol, divorce, or multiple teenage pregnancies, are viewed frequently as undeserving of government assistance" (Hersberger 1999). Librarians need to reflect on their personal attitudes and biases when faced with serving the homeless.

### **ALA Policy on Library Services for the Poor**

In June 1990 the ALA recognized the urgent need to respond to the increasing numbers of poor people in America. Fifteen policy objectives were approved by the ALA. The objectives were:

1. Promoting the removal of all barriers to library and information services, particularly fees and overdue charges.
2. Promoting the publication, production, purchase, and ready accessibility of print and nonprint materials that honestly address the issues of poverty and homelessness, that deal with poor people in a respectful way, and that are of practical use to low-income patrons.
3. Promoting full, stable, and ongoing funding for existing legislation programs in support of low-income services, and for pro-active library programs that reach beyond traditional service-sites to poor children, adults, and families.

4. Promoting training opportunities for librarians, in order to teach effective techniques for generating public funding to upgrade library services to poor people.
5. Promoting the incorporation of low-income programs and services into regular library budgets in all types of libraries, rather than the tendency to support these projects solely with "soft money" like private or federal grants.
6. Promoting equity in funding adequate library services for poor people in terms of materials, facilities, and equipment.
7. Promoting supplemental support for library resources for and about low-income populations by urging local, state, and federal governments, and the private sector, to provide adequate funding.
8. Promoting increased public awareness-through programs, displays, bibliographies, and publicity-of the importance of poverty-related library resources and services in all segments of society.
9. Promoting the determination of output measures through the encouragement of community needs assessments, giving special emphasis to assessing the needs of low-income people and involving both anti-poverty advocates and poor people themselves in such assessments.
10. Promoting direct representation of poor people and anti-poverty advocates through appointment to local boards and creation of local advisory committees on service to low-income people, such appointments to include library-paid transportation and stipends.
11. Promoting training to sensitize library staff to issues affecting poor people and to attitudinal and other barriers that hinder poor people's use of libraries.
12. Promoting networking and cooperation between libraries and other agencies, organizations, and advocacy groups in order to develop programs and services that effectively reach poor people.
13. Promoting the implementation of an expanded federal low-income housing program, national health insurance, full-employment policy; living minimum wage and welfare payments, affordable day, care, and programs likely to reduce, if not eliminate, poverty itself.
14. Promoting among library staff the collection of food and clothing donations, volunteering personal time to anti-poverty activities and contributing money to direct-aid organizations.
15. Promoting related efforts concerning minorities and women, since these groups are disproportionately represented among poor people.

#### *ALA Handbook of Organization 1995/1996*

The ALA stated, "it is crucial that libraries recognize their role in enabling poor people to participate fully in a democratic society, by utilizing a wide variety of available resources and strategies" (Venturella 1998).

The Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the ALA created the Task Force on Hunger, Homelessness, and Poverty. This was to increase awareness of "the dimensions, causes, and ways to end hunger, homelessness, and poverty, as well as a better recognition of the library/poverty nexus" (Venturella 1998). The Office for Literacy and Outreach Service (OLOS) Subcommittee on Library Services to the Poor and Homeless develops and recommends to the OLOS Advisory Committee "initiatives and priorities to achieve implementation of the ALA Poor People's Policy, to participate actively in said implementation, and to monitor the profession's effectiveness in achieving that implementation" (McCook 2002).

Clearly, the ALA has a compassionate, concerned, and serving attitude toward the nation's poor and its homeless. That attitude should filter down to all libraries and become a catalyst for change in the lives of the poor and the homeless. It should also be a catalyst for change in the libraries. Every public library in the United

States has the opportunity to serve those who are poor and homeless. In the case of rural areas where resources for the homeless are few or non-existent, what the public library is able to provide can be crucial. At times this may be shelter from the elements in communities where there are no shelter facilities for the homeless. But certainly, on a daily basis, the library can provide resources to help both the housed poor and the homeless get vital information on services they are qualified to receive.

### **Inexpensive Things Libraries can do to Assist the Poor and Homeless**

Libraries can do some fairly inexpensive things to assist people who are poor and those who are homeless. Among these things are providing vital community and social service referral information; job search and career guidance; and educational/vocational course information. They can keep on hand a variety of job applications and tax forms as well as a driver's license applications; first aid, dietary, AIDS, and other healthcare information; sample check books; magazines and children's books to give away; sample ballots; and current classified and help wanted sections. Librarians can assemble collections that can be taken into the streets-and into shelters, welfare hotels, Head Start programs, and food kitchens. Libraries can band together with social services to create "crisis literacy" programs that provide strategies for managing bureaucratic mazes or instructions for filling out complicated forms (Venturella 1998).

Another thing libraries can do is post a listing of "Ten Reasons Why A Person Who Is Homeless Would Use A Library." The library should make sure the ten reasons are representative of what that particular library has to offer. Such a list might include the following:

- Community information and referral services
- Regional guides and newspapers
- Job search/career guidance
- Quiet study environment

- Educational/vocational courses information
- Programs for Children
- Literacy/ESL tutoring
- New reader/ foreign language materials
- Adult program
- Audiovisual materials (Venturella 1998)

### **How Libraries Serve the Homeless**

Many libraries are allowing the homeless to use shelter addresses as proof of residency to obtain library cards. Once the library card is obtained, fees in public libraries may act as a barrier to the poor and homeless. In the United States there is a trend to protect basic services and charge for supplemental services. However, there is no agreement as to what constitutes basic services and what services are special (Kagan1999).

What is seen as a special service at one time may be considered a basic service at another time. The Lawrence County Public Library in Tennessee implemented a policy stating there would be a one dollar fee for Inter-Library Loan. This could be enough to stop a poor person from requesting a book or books that they could not otherwise get from the library, which is home to a collection of about 45,000 titles.

Overdue fines also act as a barrier. While the ALA policy promotes removing fees and overdue fines as barriers to the poor, it is up to the individual libraries to decide how to do this. Theft is also a problem and a common occurrence on the street. If a homeless person checks out a book and the person's belongings are stolen there is little chance the book will ever be returned to the library. The library may be able to work out some kind of repayment plan with the homeless person. But in the meantime the issue of whether the homeless person can continue to check books out of the library exists.

The Tulsa (Oklahoma) Public Library experienced an increase in the number of homeless



using the library as a shelter while Pat Woodrum was the library director. Woodrum organized community groups and found private funding to create the Tulsa Day Center for the homeless. At this center the homeless “can take a shower, get snacks, seek counseling and medical attention, and use the resources of a special library collection” (Venturella 1998).

Other examples of services for the homeless include a referral service offered by The Memphis/Shelby County Public Library in Tennessee. The Enoch Pratt Free Library working with the Baltimore County Coalition for the Homeless provides a “Street Card” listing services available to the needy. The Multnomah (Oregon) County Public Library and Milwaukee Public Library both used special federal grants to place self-help material and books in homeless shelters and centers (Venturella 1998).

### **Computer Services and the Homeless**

A homeless man by the name of Tim Donohue used the local library in Henderson, Nevada to write a book entitled *In the Open*. Donohue said, “If it hadn’t been for the library, and for the word processors there- which you can use almost for free-I probably wouldn’t have been able to write the book.” (Venturella 1998) While this is perhaps an unusual example of what can happen when computer access is given to the poor and homeless there are also other more mundane examples of what computer access can allow the poor to accomplish.

Urban libraries have found that Internet access is particularly valuable to homeless people. An April 2, 2000 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* explained how enthusiastically homeless patrons have taken to the Net. Reporter Mike Weiss found that while homeless patrons “made great use of traditional services like book and periodical collections, and somewhat less-traditional ones such as videos available for viewing on the facility’s VCRs, it’s the Internet terminals that they rushed for as soon as the building opened its doors each morning” (Flagg 2000). Help for the homeless databases provide immediate assistance in solving everyday problems. “...the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the

Homeless, for example, hopes to put its shelter bed registry online soon— the Department of Housing and Urban Development is working on a national database project” (Flagg 2000).

E-mail is a favorite choice of communication for homeless Internet users. A February 2000 *Newhouse News Service* report described how a homeless patron called Dingle “uses e-mail to exchange tips with similarly situated friends around the country on which cities offer good welfare benefits, places to avoid, and even lightly-guarded Internet terminals on college campuses” (Flagg 2000). Other homeless users stay in touch with family via e-mail because they do not have cell phones. E-mail at the public library is a free, quick service while regular mail involves paying postage and several days of delay before the letter arrives. Having the response to the e-mail arrive via the computer is also simpler than having to check at the post office to see if mail has arrived.

### **The Digital Divide**

In 1999 the Library Program of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation was launched. This was an effort to bridge the digital divide between the technology “haves” and “have nots”. The first states participating in the program were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

Computers were donated to libraries where the average poverty rate was over ten percent. The number of computers donated was based on the total number of people living in the areas. The program also provided for the training of librarians and staff. Technical assistance was provided for three years. In states where there were library schools, graduate library student interns assisted with onsite troubleshooting.

When the program began, about one-third of the computer users surveyed said they had never been to a library. Patron traffic increased an average of 36 percent following the installation of the computers with one third of the library patrons having no other access to the Internet. “Students or adults reporting annual household incomes of less than \$15,000 used the computers

most often and for the longest periods. Public access computers also appeared to be especially important to those whose highest level of education is high school or less and to the unemployed” (Gordon, et al. 2001). Half of the unemployed who were looking for work said that library computers were the only source of access they had. “Among computer users, African Americans and Native Americans are overrepresented among those living in households with annual incomes under \$15,000” (Gordon, et al. 2001).

The digital divide has a number of different dimensions. They relate to race, income, education, age, and place of residence: Caucasians have significantly more access to computers and the Internet than other racial groups, and Native Americans have the least. African American children in some places, however, have more computer access at school than their Caucasian classmates. People earning higher incomes are more likely to have access at home and work than people earning lower incomes. People with more education are more likely to have access than people with less education, especially those who didn’t continue their education beyond high school. Younger people are significantly more likely to have access than older people, and people with children are more likely to have computers at home (Gordon, et al. 2001).

Alabama was the first state to receive the Library Program computers. At the time of installation the computers were the most up to date available. However by the time the program ended in 2003, the wealthier states that had received their computers later were still ahead of Alabama. This was because the wealthier states received computers that were the most up to date available (Gordon, et al. 2001).

Eighty-three percent of librarians reported their libraries had made sufficient efforts to inform the public know that public access computers were available. However, at the time the Gates Library Program was underway, there was a lack of public awareness concerning both the computers and the computer classes in libraries. Many public libraries limited their outreach to library posters. While it is clear that a number of new patrons were reached, there is a large group of the very

poorest citizens who have not been informed about free access to computers and the Internet (Gordon, et al. 2001).

### **E-Libraries: A Way to Reach the Economically Disadvantaged**

E-libraries are being used to reach the poor and expand existing library services. Florida’s Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library became one of the first systems in the country to promote e-libraries in remote areas of Hillsborough county. The e-libraries are not staffed by library personnel and are housed in recreation centers. Manager of Materials and Circulation Services, Marcee Challener said, “It’s a way to have a library presence. We are their Internet provider.” Residents are also able to place holds on materials, pick up materials sent from other libraries, and return materials at the e-libraries (Aranda 2004).

Hialeah Public Libraries, also in Florida, built three e-libraries between 2001 and 2003. The purpose was “to increase outreach services to communities defined by low income, transportation constraints, and the “Digital Divide” (Aranda 2004). The libraries are in centralized locations and are connected to police substations. They offer “reference and circulating collections, daily book deliveries, newspapers, magazines, and the immediate ability to place reserves, request interlibrary loans, and have access to librarians” (Aranda 2004). Hialeah’s e-libraries serve a population that is over 90 percent Hispanic and where 34.6 percent of the population lives below poverty level. The e-libraries have been a success with residents of all ages who use the Internet and attending computer classes.

Maria Alpizar, the Director of Hialeah Public Libraries said, “There are at least three profiles in which an e-Library concept might work well toward expanding existing services.” They are: 1) for rural populations, where distance from centralized libraries is a tremendous issue for patrons, such as in the case of Tampa; 2) for small, branch systems that desperately need a low-cost way of opening another service point, and 3) for areas with a population explosion,



such as Hialeah in western Miami-Dade County. In a city with a population of over 225,000, each neighborhood wants its own library and if funding or space isn't immediately available, it has been our experience that the e-Library concept creates an immediate sense of ownership with an increase in service overall (Aranda 2004).

The Hialeah e-libraries serve as learning centers too. Computer literacy classes and English classes are offered when the library is not open through partnerships with high schools' adult education centers. The Hialeah e-libraries are helping to close the gap in the Digital Divide.

### Conclusion

It is clear that much is being done to help the poor and homeless in obtaining information and

help via America's public libraries. Libraries need to increase their outreach efforts. They also need to keep the programs they currently have in support of the poor and homeless. Libraries need to share information with other libraries about what they are doing and funding must actively be sought to implement new programs. If this is accomplished, the poor and the homeless may discover the best help available to them is found in the nation's public libraries.

### Note

Tom, the homeless man who frequented the Madison County Public Library, has found a job. He is now living in an apartment in Alabama and saving money to make a down payment on a house.

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